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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006424

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PACOM FOR FPA HUSO
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH THAI FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: STATE 174287

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) The Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Nitya (Nit) Pibulsonggram on October 20. The Ambassador reviewed the reftel talking points item by item, describing the concern in Washington over the pace of the return to democracy. He highlighted our disappointment in particular that martial law remained in effect. The Ambassador explained the difficulty of holding any meeting between President Bush and the Thai prime minister at APEC in November if significant progress on the timeline to restore democracy has not been made. The Ambassador took note of the positive steps which the Thai have taken, including the installation of a civilian government, the interim constitution and the National Assembly. However, in each case, there were some elements that could leave the impression that the military's timeline for returning power might be lengthening rather than shortening. These included the fact that the PM was a retired military officer and the significant role for the "coup council" (the Council on National Security) detailed in the interim constitution. The delay in lifting martial law, however, stood out as the issue of most immediate concern.

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Nit affirmed that the interim government understood our position. "Off the record" he said that some members of the government have also asked why martial law needs to remain in effect. However, the government is concerned by information that there are efforts afoot to stir up unrest in the countryside. Leaflets are being distributed in the countryside, for example, in support of former Prime Minister Thaksin. The Ambassador asked if there were more specifics available on the nature of these threats to security, but Nit was unable to provide further information, other than to say that there was "credible intelligence." Nit said that the government would lift martial law when it believed the time was right. Thailand could not lift martial law precipitously in early November just to respond to US pressure over the APEC meeting; that would "hurt their self-respect." Nit referred repeatedly to the possibility of lifting martial law for the King's birthday on December 5, and emphasized that this would be viewed by the Thai as a very appropriate day. The Ambassador reminded him that we would view waiting until December 5 as

quite a long delay, calling his attention again to the timing of the APEC meeting in November. We also noted that, within Thailand, there were more concerns being raised, even from people who had initially accepted the coup, largely due to the continued application of martial law. Nit appeared surprised by this assessment.

¶3. (C) Foreign Minister Nit said that he personally found the benchmarks that the US laid out to be useful. They were the same goals that the interim government was aiming to reach, although we might have some differences in our views on the right timetable. Nit assured us that the government did not intend to move the goalposts; its plan was to finish the reform and hold elections within a year. Nit asked for the US to recognize that the coup was not conducted by people interested in clinging to power themselves. That said, he and the cabinet recognized that the one-year schedule would be very difficult to keep.

¶4. (C) Comment: From Nit's response, the interim government and the Council on National Security are very aware of the US concerns. But it also seems clear that, in their most recent deliberations, some in the government see the King's birthday on December 5 as the most auspicious time to lift martial law. We are struck again how the overburdened interim government seems to be tone-deaf on this issue, unaware of the growing unease that martial law is causing among those Thai who initially accepted the coup as a necessary evil. We will continue to urge that, in the absence of credible threats to national security of which we are unaware, the government get over its fears and lift martial law as soon as possible, as the necessary next step toward the quick and full return of civil liberties and elected government.

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